

**Opening Statement of Chairman Dan Burton
Government Reform Committee
Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness
“Living with Disabilities in the United States: A Snapshot”
June 24, 2004**

The Subcommittee is convening today to examine the quality of life experienced by persons with disabilities in the United States. In addition, the Subcommittee will discuss the ways in which the Federal Government and non-governmental organizations are working to expand the participation and contributions of this population of Americans.

A disability is defined as a physical or a mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities of an individual. According to the United States Census Bureau, there are over 49 million persons in the United States living with some form of disability.

Unfortunately the rate of disability in our country is staggering and a majority of this underserved population doesn't enjoy the quality of life that many of us take for granted everyday.

The United States government has taken many actions over the years in order to better accommodate the population of disabled Americans. The *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Public Law 93-112) was the first civil rights act with regard to disability. This legislation represented the first step toward more sensitivity and accessibility for persons with disabilities, and established a role for the Federal Government to provide vocational rehabilitation for disabled Americans.

After several years of researching the best solutions on disability policy in the United States, in 1990 Congress passed, and the President signed into law, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (Public Law 101-336), which promulgated the first anti-discrimination guidelines on disability in the United States. This law prohibits discrimination in the hiring and continued employment of disabled persons in the workplace, and provides that “no individual with a disability shall be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination by a public entity”. The Act also dictates that no person shall be discriminated against the enjoyment of any place of public accommodation based on a disability.

The Honorable James R. Langevin, Congressman from Rhode Island, was rendered paralyzed after an accident occurred while attending a Boy Scout event when he was sixteen years of age. Since that time, Congressman Langevin has worked diligently in the Rhode Island State Assembly, as the Secretary of State of Rhode Island, and now as a Representative of Rhode Island’s 2nd Congressional District to sponsor and support a variety of health and disability legislation and efforts. In addition to proposing and supporting various healthcare initiatives, Congressman Langevin founded and currently serves as a Co-Chairperson of the Bi-partisan Disabilities Caucus in Congress. The Subcommittee has the distinct honor and privilege to have Congressman Langevin testify this afternoon about his numerous activities with regard to disability policy, as well as to give his personal experiences as an individual living with a disability in the United States.

The Federal Government has not only ensured that discrimination based upon disability is unlawful in the United States, but has also worked toward providing programs to assist with healthcare and educational opportunities for the disabled

population. To explain these most important initiatives, Troy Justesen, Acting Assistant Secretary with the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the Department of Education, is here to speak on the educational programs made available to students with disabilities. In addition, the Subcommittee will be receiving testimony from the Honorable Don Young, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office on Health Policy at the Department of Health and Human Services. Mr. Young will testify on the various healthcare programs and services that the Agency has implemented to assist the Nation's disabled population.

To further expound upon disability policy in the United States, Dr. Peter Blanck, Director of the Law, Health Policy & Disability Center at the University of Iowa College of Law will testify today on the status of disabilities in the country.

There is no question that persons with disabilities have to overcome physical or mental obstacles every day, but there are some individuals who have conquered their impediment and gone on to achieve greatness. For example, even though a car accident rendered Robert David Hall a double-amputee in 1978, he continued his career as an entertainer and went on to act professionally in numerous television and movie roles, most notably as a current star of the popular TV show, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, where he has played the role of Dr. Al Robbins for several seasons. As a national figure, Mr. Hall has used his celebrity status to further the cause of disability awareness around the country, serving on various boards promoting disability support, including the National Organization on Disability. The Subcommittee is delighted to have Mr. Hall speak on his involvement in the disability community.

While physical disabilities may be perceived as limitations preventing individuals from participating in athletic competition, more than 5,000 individuals with disabilities around the world participate in the Paralympics, a division of the Olympic Committee reserved for persons living with a disability. The Paralympics feature 21 sports, 18 of which are also contested in the Olympics. To gain a better understanding of this competition, the Subcommittee will receive testimony from Mr. John Register, Manager of the Paralympic Academy for the United States Olympic Committee and Paralympic Gold Medal winner.

Although there have been many advances in technology and disability policy in the United States, the quality of life of these individuals has been shown through many surveys to be less than non-disabled individuals. Recently, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) commissioned a Harris Poll survey regarding the lifestyles of both individuals living with and without disabilities. The Subcommittee has invited the President of NOD, Mr. Alan Reich, to testify on the results of this poll, and potential initiatives that may lead to a better quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for being with us today to speak on this most important matter, and I look forward to hearing their testimony.